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ABSTRACT

A major controversy arose in 1987 in a midwestern school district, after a middle school teacher assigned the novel "Go Ask Alice" to her seventh-grade class. This book describes the district's attempt to answer two basic questions: What should students read? and Who should decide what students read? The book controversy is first described chronologically and then from the perspectives of four individuals most involved in the controversy--the parent, the superintendent, the teacher, and the director. Data were obtained from interviews with 23 people directly connected to the controversy, a review of school district documents and newspaper accounts, and observation of committee meetings. The book examines the controversy in terms of its substantial aspects (related to contents), and procedural aspects (related to the methods used for processing the objection). In particular, the book describes the controversy that resulted from the textbook assignment; examines the processes used by district officials to resolve the controversy and discusses what those processes reveal about how schools solve controversies in general; considers the power of image-based thinking and how that type of thinking interfered with the resolution of the book controversy; and discusses the broader implications of image-based thinking in developing solutions to education problems. This middle school case suggests that book controversies that are resolved within the institution result in de facto censorship. Recommendations for resolving book controversies include: (1) identify both latent and manifest dimensions of a problem; (2) attend both to the process by which solutions can be achieved and to the substance of the solution; (3) recognize the influence of educators' epistemologies on defining issues; (4) avoid the lure of the power of images; and (5) lead by unraveling misleading images and focusing on the substance of the issues. The book contains a list of case law relevant to book controversies and a list of print resources on censorship. (Contains 30 references.) (LMI)